

Autism Spectrum Disorders

What are the autism spectrum disorders?

The **autistic spectrum disorders** (ASDs), also called **pervasive developmental disorder** (PDD), are conditions that are usually diagnosed in early childhood, although the effects of the disorder are lifelong. Autism is thought of as a “spectrum” disorder because people with autism can have very different features or symptoms. **Asperger syndrome** is a milder form of autism. If a child has symptoms of autism or Asperger syndrome, but does not meet the diagnostic criteria for either disorder, the child may be diagnosed with **pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified** (PDD-NOS).

What are the features of autism?

The main signs and symptoms of autism involve abnormal **communication** (such as delayed or repetitive speech), abnormal **social interactions** (such as difficulty sharing toys or a lack of imaginative play), and **repetitive behavior** (such as arm flapping or focusing on a single toy).

The autism spectrum disorders are often detected by the age of three years, and in some cases may be diagnosed earlier. Children with ASD usually do not follow the typical patterns of child development. In most cases, the problems in communication and social skills become more noticeable as the child lags further behind other children the same age. Between approximately 1 – 3 years of age, the differences in the way most children with ASD behave and react to people become apparent. Some parents report the change as being sudden (the child rejects people, acts strangely, and loses language and social skills). In other cases, the changes that develop are more gradual.

Many children with ASD have some degree of mental retardation. Children with autism or another ASD may have additional problems, such as sensory problems (problems with certain sounds, textures, tastes, or smells) or seizures.

What causes autism?

Currently, the exact cause of autism is not known. There is no cure, but treatments (such as behavior and communication therapies or medications) can help. Your child's doctor(s) will discuss appropriate therapies or treatment options with you.

For more information

Autism Society of America - <http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer>

Autism Speaks - <http://www.autismspeaks.org/>

Autism Today - <http://www.autismtoday.com/>

Source: National Institute of Mental Health - <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/autism.cfm>